

Mental health: coming to a high school parking lot near you

By Brock Weir

Suicide is the second-leading cause of death for young Canadians between the ages of 15 and 34, and the Canadian Mental Health Association wants to be there for teens when they need them — and on their own terms.

As doctors from across Ontario prepare to hit the ice next weekend for the DOCS on Ice Tournament, which will bring over 900 doctors to both Aurora and Newmarket for the three day event, all proceeds raised in the event — a goal of \$200,001 — will be funnelled into a —pioneering— new venture for the organization, which serves York Region and South Simcoe.

—We are going to be launching one of Canada's first mobile mental health clinics for youth,— says Rebecca Shields, CEO of the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) of York Region, of what they aim to do with the money raised. —We are thrilled at this opportunity. [Our Goal] is to work with our partners to ensure that all youth are prepared to take care of their mental health, know where to go for support, and have rapid access to services for their mental illness.—

The CMHA is working with school boards and other community partners to make the concept work, based on similar models undertaken at Covenant House Vancouver with their drop-in psychiatry model, as well as Calgary's —Alex— bus, which provides support for teens.

—Think about it as a rock band tour bus wrapped in graffiti,— says Ms. Shields. —It might sit at a mall one evening or outside a school late one afternoon or evening, and in different spots across York Region, and South Simcoe. We know youth need to be able to access support services when they are ready in a way that is tailored to them and without any barriers for them to get there.

—In the first seven months, The Alex bus had 1,700 kids come to it so that is a really great indicator [of the need]. There are incredible gaps in service, especially for people in the north. There is no way to get these services, especially if they are kids. How are they going to get there? What if they are afraid to tell their parents? Transit is horrible and they often suffer and their lives are at stake.—

Collaborating on this new initiative for the York Region and South Simcoe areas are the Ontario Shores Mental Health Centre, which is the CMHA's research partner, as well as York University in developing the model. They are also being —innovative and responsive— in developing technology like mobile apps and social media methods not only to connect with people, but provide ways in which young people can know where to actually find the services.

—Teens will just be able to walk in and meet with people from a multi-disciplinary team,— says Ms. Shields. —We will have psychiatry, nursing, peer workers, social workers and a variety of people on the bus they can have access to right away, no appointments necessary. Support is there. There is no judgement.—

Asked for her pitch to potential youth, Ms. Shields says, —You don't have to feel bad. Support is there. There is no judgement. Come check it out and see if it works for you. You don't have to make an appointment. You can just come and see if it is right for you. We are there with your peers to make it as comfortable for you to receive the services that matter to you — and it is a confidential service.—

The CMHA hopes to have the bus on the road, visiting area high schools and malls, as early as this fall.

DOCS on Ice will take place at the Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex and Newmarket's Magna Centre April 3 — 5. For more information, visit docsonice.ca.